WHEN WORDS UNINTENTIONALLY WOUND: A DUTY TO SELF-CENSOR[1]

Ruth Tallman

Based on Robert Baker's metaphorical view of damaging language, I argue that morally responsible individuals are obligated to refrain from using the word 'gay' as a negative adjective directed towards that which the speaker dislikes. According to the metaphorical view, while a speaker may understand her use of the word 'gay' as devoid of homosexual connotations, the hearer – particularly a young person still coming to understand his own sexuality – is likely to conclude that his 'gayness' puts him in the same hated category as all of those other objects, events, and persons who are negatively called 'gay'.

In January 2012, forty-seven year-old stand-up comedian Todd Glass came out as a homosexual on episode 245 of the podcast 'WTF with Marc Maron'. Despite having been in a homosexual relationship for the past fifteen years, Glass's sexual orientation had previously been known only to a small circle of family and friends. His decision to publically out himself was made in response to the recent spate of suicides by homosexual teens and young adults. Glass said he felt compelled, as a public figure, to present himself as a model for young homosexuals who are struggling to come to terms with their sexual identity, in particular the young people who have committed suicide as a direct result of the oppression, rejection, and isolation they feel as homosexuals.

Glass's decision came in the midst of the most contentious civil rights movement the United States has seen in

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fifty years. While homosexuals are gaining more rights and public acceptance than ever before, the battle is far from won, and every political victory is tinged with the sadness of another young person who felt so hated that she took her own life rather than face the world as a homosexual. In the ongoing battle for equal civil liberties for and acceptance of homosexuals, I argue that we ought take one simple step to shun anti-gay bigotry and to support not only the homosexuals we know, but those we don't know we know as well, by condemning the use of the word 'gay' as a non-homosexually-related negative adjective.

While free speech and the free exchange of ideas are of foundational importance, I argue that we have a special duty to self-censor and to encourages others to censor their language with respect to this usage of the word 'gay'. Words like 'faggot' are seen as increasingly unacceptable today, but our society finds it relatively innocuous to call bands, exams, cars, and sneakers 'gay'. I argue that the use of this descriptor is far more dangerous than it seems. To unpack the damaging effect of this word, I will examine several classes of words that fall into the category of 'hate speech', and offer an explanation of the ways in which these kinds of words cause harm, and why those who claim to support homosexual rights ought to choose to refrain from this particular usage of the word 'gay'.

Hate Speech – Character vs. Identity

Jerome Neu defines hate speech as language that is 'designed to make individuals feel demeaned, despised, and rejected'.[2] These are words used to negatively target an individual – they *mean* to cause offense. Some hate words attack a person for something he has done, an action over which he had control. Generally, words such as 'asshole', 'douchebag', and 'bitch', pick out individuals on the basis of their behavior. This category of hate words seems importantly different from words that select

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individuals on the basis of their membership in an unchosen group, usually based on sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability. Note that I believe 'bitch' belongs in the former category, as when the word is used in a negative way it is most often not attributed to women simply because they are women, but because they are *behaving* in a particular way.

Charles R. Lawrence III points out that there is something more viscerally damaging about words that target based on unchosen group membership. When a negative word is assigned to an individual based on her behavior, there is room for discussion. Suppose Lisa calls Fred an asshole because he cut her off in traffic. Fred, angered at being called an asshole without what he believes to be good cause, retorts that Lisa is a bitch (for unjustifiably calling him an asshole). While this exchange may well end in nothing more than anger on the parts of both Fred and Lisa, the two could, if they chose, engage in a discussion about Fred's reasons for driving as he did, why Lisa felt this was inappropriate, why Fred felt Lisa's response was inappropriate, and so forth.

Now, instead, consider what would happen if Fred responded to Lisa's verbal assault not by calling her a bitch, but by choosing a word that negatively associates her with a group of which she is in fact a member, using a derogatory descriptor of that group, for instance, by calling her a 'dyke'. Here, Lawrence argues, the possibility of conversation becomes much more difficult.[3] What is most damaging about negative group identifiers is that the individuals thus labeled cannot simply deny the negative charge; after all, it is, in a sense, true. The problem is that the negativity is packed into the perception of the group itself (by the user of the negative term) in a way that is not easily extractable. Before Lisa could even get to a conversation about Fred's actions, her response, and the appropriateness of either, she would have to unwind a tight knot of intolerance and oppression that led to the word 'dyke' being used as a hate word in this exchange. In most cases, overt hate

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speech such as this simply shuts down conversation, rather than promoting it – which is exactly what the users of the words intent.

Metaphor

While there is no question that overt hate speech can be felt as a visceral blow, the process by which negative meaning gets packed into words, particularly words that did not originally have negative connotations, can be difficult to explain. One understanding of the way such words obtain their powerful punch is known as the *metaphorical view*. Robert Baker points out that the term 'boy', originally non-evaluative, took on a negative connotation when used by white slave holders to refer to African American men. The neutrality of the word was warped through its metaphorical use. The individuals in question were demeaned through the use of a metaphor designating these adults as 'boys', thus calling to mind traits of literal boys – immaturity, lack of agency, and so forth. Designating adults in this way was a very effective method of verbally diminishing the individual's self-worth. It was a way of saying, 'you are boys, not men, and thus deserve to be treated as such'.[4]

Stephanie Ross furthers Baker's thesis regarding the metaphorical power of words by arguing that the metaphorical connotations of words used to describe or refer to individuals can erode their self-image without them even being aware of it. A woman who is continually referred to by names such as 'doll' and 'baby' will unconsciously, or half-consciously, develop a view of herself as incapable, dependent, childlike.[5] The thing that makes the use of such words so pernicious, on Ross's account, is that metaphor conveys attitude, rather than literal cognitive content.[6] The problem is that, since no literal belief statements are being conveyed, the target (and other hearers) cannot simply deny that content. Instead, the use of the word causes a subtle attitudinal shift in one's perception of the target of the word.

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Intent

On a pernicious understanding of the metaphor, 'Sally is a doll', the doll-like properties attributed to Sally are similar to those of 'boy' offered by Baker. The pernicious reading says that Sally is childlike, lacking volition, that she exists merely to be used and manipulated by others. If this is the message that Sally hears, over and over, it will negatively inform her own self-perception.

Metaphors are effective because of the powerful mental images they conjure. However, language is ever evolving, and the mental connections made by speakers and listeners are not always univocal. Many young women today, who have never felt demeaned or oppressed based on their gender, simply do not perceive that pernicious meaning when they hear themselves or others referred to as 'doll', as they ascribe different properties to the vehicle, taking the metaphor as a compliment, primarily to their beauty, but also to their character. The way in which metaphorical meaning changes over time, eventuating in dead metaphors, can be seen in the word 'stud'. Today, a stud is a man who is desired and sought after by many women. This is positive. Although the metaphorical use of the word 'stud' refers back to a term in animal husbandry – the stud is the rare uncastrated male animal kept solely for breeding purposes – the two meanings have diverged to a point that the chances of the word's metaphorical power causing a man to feel worthless except as a breeder seems quite unlikely.

As our language changes, metaphors do as well. 'Stud' looks like a pretty good example of a metaphor that has all but lost its original meaning, and thus lacks a pernicious punch. A metaphor simply can't have an insidious effect on someone if he has no idea what it means, or if he takes it to mean something positive. If changes in language were to entirely wash the negativity out of a once hateful word, it could, over time, cease to be hate speech and become entirely innocuous. However, things get more dicey when

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the negativity of a metaphor still hangs in the air, unbeknownst to some, but painfully present to others. As our language endures growing pains, we encounter examples such as 'Jew down', a racially charged phrase that many speakers use with no idea of the negative history connected with the words coming out of their mouths. While it might be clear that the speaker does not intend offense against Jews by the use of this phrase, it seems some corrective education is still in order. A speaker who uses such a phrase ought to know what other people will perceive when they hear the words. Once informed, an individual who continues to use the phrase is knowingly selecting language that has historically been used to reinforce negative views of particular groups. While the speaker might not have negative feelings towards Jewish people, or believe that Jewish people are miserly, once the speaker is aware of the connotations associated with this phrase, the decision to continue using it implies that the speaker is comfortable using words that perpetuate the racial stereotype. Is this ok?

Taking It Back

A strong argument can be made in support of the position that it is actively good to take steps to remove the ban – and accompanying stigma – of hurtful words. Placing something in the category of 'taboo' gives it power, and when the word in question already holds the power to hurt, why give it an extra boost? Enter the concept of 'taking back' words. In the 1970s, the gay community took back the word 'queer', at the time used as a purposeful term of abuse, and co-opted the very weapon used to hurt them, thus turning an instrument of harm into a tool of empowerment. This has been amazingly successful. The takeover has been so complete, 'queer' has become not only an acceptable, but even a gay-positive way of referring to homosexuals. Similar movements have been adopted in

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feminist circles with regard to the words 'slut' and 'cunt'. These movements rely on the fact that we can and do make distinctions about how we understand words based on speaker, context, and intent. The same word can sometimes be negative and sometimes positive, and a savvy listener is usually able to tell the difference.

Coming Out

The interview with Todd Glass discussed at the start of this paper was powerful on many levels. Glass is a homosexual who should have had a relatively easy time of it. His family was loving and supportive, and his profession is filled with open, accepting people. The rush of support from his peers, friends, and fans upon his coming out was truly touching. Yet, Glass remained closeted to most of the world until he was in his late 40s. He described his efforts to keep his sexual orientation hidden, meeting girls in bars, driving them home, and then returning to the bar to feed his friends bogus stories of his heterosexual exploits. So desperate was Glass's compulsion to keep his secret, he confided in interviewer Marc Maron that he would dream about meeting a woman with a terminal illness, so that he could have a brief sham marriage and then live out the rest of his life as a widower, thus manufacturing a plausible reason for never being in relationships with women.

Glass's decades as a closeted homosexual is an experience shared by many homosexuals who are unsure when, if ever, it is ok to reveal their minority status. Because homosexuality is something that must be revealed, the question of when, and to whom, burns in many homosexuals' minds. In the worst cases, young people face the prospect of being cut off from their families, rejected by their friends, and subjected to the worst kinds of physical and emotional abuse. Individuals who do not fear such terrible consequences may simply be unsure when and how to reveal this very personal fact about themselves. In a

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world where heterosexuality is still the default assumption, closeted or partially closeted people find themselves feeling like liars every time they fail to correct comments that reveal an assumption of their heterosexuality. They are unable to talk freely about their crushes or even their established partners. They find themselves being elusive or constructing outright fibs regarding those with whom they spend their time. Those wanting to come out may find the lies continuing, as it feels impossible to ever find just the right time to make the big reveal. When considering whether a particular person or group is safe to come out to, many homosexuals find themselves searching for any sign of how the news would be received by that person or group. Any indication of a negative attitude towards homosexuality could be reason enough to keep one's secret hidden.

The Word 'Gay'

The tiny word 'gay' has had several distinct meanings over time, and like so many interesting words, it is sometimes positive, sometimes merely descriptive and value-neutral, and sometimes negative. Originally meaning 'joyful' or 'carefree', 'gay' began as a wholly positive adjective. However, alongside this well known historical meaning, the word early on acquired a secondary usage. The innocent joy of the first meaning was transformed into a more negative understanding, in which a gay person was a non-conforming hedonist, devoted to pursing that carefree joy with an unseemly disregard for social convention. 'Gay' became an adjective attributed to those operating outside of traditional sexual morality, such as prostitutes and philanderers. From there, the term eventually came to hone in on a particular type of sexual non-conformity – homosexuality, and eventually became an established, non-evaluative term for individuals who are attracted to members of their own sex. Out of this established usage, however, two more

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meanings of the word 'gay' have emerged. 'Gay' is sometimes used as an adjective to describe things connected with homosexual culture or lifestyle. This usage, although it could be used negatively, is not necessarily negative; it is often merely descriptive. The final meaning of the word 'gay' is very new, having risen to prominence only within the last fifteen to twenty years. This usage, clearly derived from its predecessors, is necessarily pejorative, used as a descriptor for anything and everything the speaker doesn't like, or finds lame, boring, or unpleasant.

To recap, five distinct meanings of the word 'gay' have been identified:

1) Joyful and carefree (positive)
2) Nonconventional hedonist, often emphasizing non-conformity to sexual norms, not yet focusing on homosexuality (usually negative)
3) A homosexual person (non-evaluative)
4) Relating to homosexual lifestyle or culture (usually non-evaluative)
5) Lame, boring, unpleasant, expressing an attitude of dislike or disapproval (negative)

'Gay' as an Adjective in a Non-homosexual Sense

Defenders of the moral permissibility of usage 5 argue that, much like 'stud', it has become a new word, with a meaning that is now utterly removed from its etymological predecessor. When speakers call songs, classes, clothing, siblings and experiences 'gay' in this sense, they do not mean 'homosexual' or 'homosexual-like'. Such defenders will argue that 'gay 5′ is a new word, and so any offense that might be taken stems from a mistaken understanding of which meaning is being used. 'Gay 5' is not a negative judgment against or about homosexuals, and homosexuals or others who take it as such have missed the speaker's intended meaning. The word *is* meant negatively, but the

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target is not homosexuals, but whatever object – shirt, haircut, referee's ruling – is being called 'gay'.[7] Use determines meaning, and this word has clearly come to be used in ways that have nothing to do with homosexuality. Any careful listener will know the difference.

Todd Glass disagrees. He describes the message many homosexuals – particularly young people who are not yet out – hear when 'gay 5' is used. Unlike 'stud', which is not a word in common usage outside of the context of livestock breeding, the word 'gay' is used all the time – both to refer to homosexuals, and to refer to things one dislikes. Glass says, 'When people use the word "gay" as an adjective. . .I can tell you what it does to a twelve year-old. It crushes their soul. . .What does "gay" mean? It means bad, it means stupid. Like gay people. They're weird, they're stupid.' Glass goes on to say that the word does not affect him in that way anymore, because he is an adult with a solid sense of self, but young people just discovering themselves and their place in the world can be deeply damaged by the casual use of this word.

Those who argue that 'gay 5' is a new word, with a meaning of its own, are correct. Those who insist that they do not intend to say anything negative about homosexuals or homosexual behavior when they use the word are probably being truthful. Maybe one day we will live in a world in which homosexuality has shed every trace of negativity and judgment, in which no homosexual feels the need to gauge the temperature of an audience and decide if it is safe to come out to them. Better yet, maybe homosexuality will one day be something that no one needs to come out about. But we're not there yet. In a society where homosexuality is still viewed as so negative by so many, there is simply not a way to use 'gay 5' without the risk that some listeners will hear the old metaphor. New meaning or not, 'gay 5' is a negative term, and it acquired its negativity from its etymological predecessors. 'Gay' is used to cast aspersions on any number of everyday objects and events. Homosexuals are also called 'gay'. Many people hate

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homosexuals with a passion that causes them to turn their own children from their homes, to beat them to death in parking lots, and to psychologically torture them until they commit suicide. While a careful listener might be able to discern that a speaker does not intend to slur homosexuals or homosexuality through her use of 'gay 5', it is not hard to see where a listener, not even a particularly careless one, might miss the nuance. Certainly, if the listener is an adolescent who has not yet ventured to share his secret, he is likely to hear nothing more than a continual proclamation that he is as bad, lame, worthless, and hated as everything else that is labeled 'gay' by the speakers around him.

Using 'gay 5' causes harm. Not always. The word is often used in contexts where it is entirely innocuous. The thing about being a homosexual, though, is that you have to say it for it to be known. Todd Glass was a popular comedian with a huge circle of friends, and the majority of them knew him for decades – would certainly have told you that they knew him quite well – without ever realizing he was gay. Any time a speaker uses 'gay 5', there is a risk that someone in the room misunderstands, and that harm is caused without the speaker even realizing it. Maybe it is a heterosexual that gets this small nudge in the direction of believing that homosexuality is negative. That's bad enough. Worse, using 'gay 5' within earshot of anyone whose sexual orientation you have not 100 percent confirmed risks subjecting someone to that soul-crushing experience described by Glass.

Many people are not remotely homophobic, in fact they are incredibly supportive of gay rights, yet they use the term, with the belief that their innocent intentions make it ok, with the belief that everyone understands that 'gay 5' is not meant in a homophobic way, with the belief that, when they speak, there will be no misunderstanding. As I said previously, this might well be true. The word does not hurt every time it is used. But why risk it? If you were to hear someone unknowingly use a term such as 'Jew down', you

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probably wouldn't think twice about informing that person of the negative power bound up in those words. Letting speakers know that their use of 'gay 5' runs the risk of making a life that is already fraught with challenges that much more painful, might encourage them to strike the word from their personal lexicons. It costs us so little to speak up, and the risk of harm we can prevent could be so great.

Ruth Tallman is Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Barry University. rtallman@barry.edu

Notes

[1] I'd like to thank Enrique Alvarado for his helpful comments on this paper.

[2] Jerome Neu, *Sticks and Stone: The Philosophy of Insults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 153–154.

[3] C. Lawrence, 'Racist Speech as the Functional Equivalent of Fighting Words', in Mappes, et al., *Social Ethics: Morality and Social Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011), 264.

[4] R. Baker, "'Pricks' and 'Chicks': A Plea For 'Persons'", in Mary Vetterling-Braggin (ed.) *Sexist Language: A Modern Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1981), 162.

[5] S. Ross, 'How Words Hurt: Attitude, Metaphor, and Oppression', in Mary Vetterling-Braggin (ed.) *Sexist Language: A Modern Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1981), 204.

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